

**07/28/21 Wednesday**

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New US Bill Would Create Federal China-Watching Service for Translating Publications Into English

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

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Years of demonization of China by the US government and media have had a considerable effect on US public opinion, with a March Gallup poll showing 67% of Americans have a negative opinion of China and 46% see China as the US' main foe - double what it was a year prior.

A group of Republican and Democratic congress members have introduced a bill calling for the creation of a special media-monitoring service that would specialize in translating Chinese broadcasts and articles into English for the US government to analyze.

The bill, introduced on Wednesday by Reps. Joaquin Castro (D-CA), Bill Keating (D-MA), Mike Gallagher (R-WI) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), would create an Open Translation and Analysis Center (OTAC) with a federal budget of \$80 million beginning in 2022.

A congressional [aide told Reuters](#) their goal was essentially to "recreate FBIS for at least" China, referring to the Foreign Broadcast Information Service created during World War II to intercept, translate, and publish broadcasts by the Axis powers. The documents were regularly distributed to war agencies.

The FBIS continued until 2005, when it became the Open Source Enterprise, now part of the CIA's Directorate of Digital Innovation, which "makes sure teams have the tools and techniques they need to operate in a modern, connected world and still be clandestine," according to the [agency's website](#).

According to Reuters, the new OTAC office would "systematically translate ... speeches, documents, reports, strategies, news articles, commentaries, journal articles, procurement contracts" by the People's Republic of China (PRC), Communist Party of China (CPC), and People's Liberation Army (PLA) "into English and publish them freely online."

"A nuanced understanding of foreign countries is impossible without reading how they communicate in their own languages," Castro told Reuters, which noted that the translations would be annotated and accompanied by analysis explaining to readers the jargon and the significance of the material.

Sinologists to Meet 'China Challenge'

As the US strategically reorients itself toward "great power competition" with Russia and China, new focus has been given to not just understanding those countries, their governments and their societies, but crafting a specific image of them to inculcate in the US population and other nations an understanding of why China must be fought.

In January, the White House National Security Council declassified and published its 2018 “US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific,” revealing the White House was presenting the burgeoning struggle against China to the US public in different terms than it understood that struggle among themselves.

[As Sputnik reported](#), the 2018 document, originally slated to remain secret until 2042, refers to the conflict between the US and China as being rooted into their differing socioeconomic systems; however, in the National Security Strategy, a public 2017 document on which the framework is based, the US-China competition is portrayed as the product of choices made by the Chinese leadership.

That mode of thinking was also at the heart of a State Department white paper on the “Elements of the China Challenge” published in November 2020 that recommended a decades-long containment strategy toward the socialist country akin to that used against the Soviet Union. According to the proposal, the US would seek to isolate China abroad by winning over its would-be allies and partners, and win over the US population at home through reforms in the education system.

[As Sputnik reported](#), that includes training a new generation of public servants that are well-versed in Chinese language and culture, but who also support the vision of constraining China. The OTAC office proposed on Wednesday would dovetail with this effort, as it would both require Americans fluent in various Chinese languages and knowledgeable about Chinese culture, politics, and public figures in order to produce its translated, annotated material. It would also help to craft a new generation of such “Sinologists” by presenting a heavily and properly framed version of events and commentary in China.

Countering China’s ‘Malign Influence’

More recently, the US State Department’s [appropriations bill](#) for fiscal year 2022 seeks considerable amounts of money for countering “malign influence” by China. For example, it allocates \$155 million for a Countering PRC Malign Influence Fund (CPMIF). The State Department’s US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which oversees US state-funded news outlets, has also set aside \$47 million for 2022 to fund Radio Free Asia, its propaganda arm concerning China.

“In many ways, China currently presents the most formidable threat to independent media worldwide,” the [USAGM budget document](#) says. “Not only do the Chinese repress freedom of information within their own country, but they export misinformation and disinformation through a well-funded global network aimed at key markets worldwide. As the United States aims to re-engage with global partners on issues of diplomatic and economic importance, they will need to combat the malign influence of China’s disinformation juggernaut.”

That includes the outlet’s special “Uyghur Service,” which it calls the “primary source for news” about the autonomous Muslim-majority Xinjiang province, where the US has claimed based on faulty evidence that China is carrying out a “genocide” of the Uyghur people. USAGM says it hopes to expand this and similar operations concerning Tibet and Hong Kong in 2022, including “investigative work to counter China’s false narratives” and “long-term projects to expose the truths behind CCP propaganda efforts.”

At a Monday summit, Chinese foreign vice-minister Xie Feng gave his American counterpart, Wendy Sherman, a [list of remedial actions](#) the US should take to repair its relationship with China and another listing issues of concern for Beijing. Included in them were removing



extensive sanctions targeting Chinese officials connected to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and more, as well as rhetorical and ideological attacks on Chinese cultural institutions such as Confucius Institutes and Chinese media outlets, and the rapid increase in racist violence targeting [Chinese and Asian-Americans](#) in the United States, which is directly tied to the growing demonization of China by the US government and media.

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Knesset Claims West Bank is Part of Israel in Letter Condemning 'Immoral' Ben & Jerry's Boycott  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A 2020 deal involving the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and later Sudan and Morocco, saw Israel postpone its plans to annex parts of Area C, a region of the West Bank ruled directly by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). However, the many Jewish settlements that dot the West Bank are already de facto annexations, as Israeli law applies there.

The vast majority of parliamentarians in Israel's Knesset signed a letter on Wednesday urging American ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's to reverse their decision to end their business ventures in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

According to the [Times of Israel](#), members of almost every Knesset party, with the exception of the Joint List and United Arab List - two Arab factions - signed the letter. The letter was a project of Merav Ben-Ari, an MK from the centrist Yesh Atid.

The letter is addressed to Unilever, the British company that owns the Vermont-based creamery and was signed by 90 of the Knesset's 120 members and describes the company's move as "an immoral and regrettable decision that harms all residents of Judea and Samaria, as well as harms hundreds of Israeli workers, Jews and Arabs alike."

"We, the undersigned, constitute nearly all the Members of the Knesset, the Israeli House of Representatives, and hail from across the political spectrum from left to right, opposition and coalition members standing together against the shameful actions made last week by Ben & Jerry's Homemade Holdings, to boycott selling products in Judea & Samaria," the letter says, using the Israeli name for the territories comprising the West Bank derived from two Hebrew kingdoms that existed there nearly 3,000 years ago.

However, the next section then refers to the creamery's move as a "decision to boycott towns and cities in Israel," implying that the West Bank and East Jerusalem are not "occupied territories," as the United Nations has described them, but parts of Israel itself.

After the letter was published, Yair Golan, a retired IDF major general who is presently an MK from the social-democratic Meretz party, reversed his decision, issuing a separate [statement on Twitter](#) saying, "after I signed I understood that the letter does not represent my position. Cities in Judea and Samaria are not cities in Israel."

According to the Times of Israel, in addition to Golan, six other MKs in all walked back their signing of the letter on Wednesday, including Labor MKs Naama Lazimi, Efrat Rayten, Gilad Kariv, Ram Shefa and Emilie Moatti.

### A Land's Complex History

The territory called the West Bank has been many things over the last century: after it was seized from the Ottoman Empire by the British Empire at the end of World War I, the territory was part of Mandatory Palestine. London allowed increased levels of Zionist settlement on the land as part of an agreement with Zionist leaders to establish a Jewish state, even as Palestinian Arab resistance increased.

In 1947, the United Nations split the territory into Israeli and Palestinian states, but in the war that followed, Israel fought all its Arab neighbors and seized much of the territory set aside for Palestinians, with Egypt taking control of the Gaza Strip and Jordan seizing the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The Palestinian state-to-be disappeared, and with Israel refusing to allow Palestinian refugees who fled from the war to return to their homes in newly-formed Israel, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians remained in the West Bank under Jordanian rule, many of them in refugee camps.

Then, in the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel mounted a sneak attack on Jordan, Egypt and Syria in which it invaded and occupied the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as Gaza, the entire Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. The UN condemned these seizures and the subsequent acceleration of Zionist settlement in the territories as violations of international law. In 1981, Israel established a civilian authority to rule over the West Bank called the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a subsidiary of the Defense Ministry, but has never made a formal attempt to annex any of the West Bank except for East Jerusalem, which it declared in 1980 when it made the city its capital.

Last summer, then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his intent to annex portions of the Jordan Valley, the easternmost part of the West Bank, but this was temporarily averted after the Trump administration orchestrated the so-called Abraham Accords, by which several Arab states agreed to normalize relations with Israel. The new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, took office last month and is an avid supporter of annexing what he calls Judea and Samaria. However, he has pledged not to do so as part of an agreement with left-wing and Arab parties to form a coalition government.

### Ben's & Jerry's NYT Op-Ed

When Ben & Jerry's [announced on July 19](#) "it is inconsistent with our values for Ben & Jerry's ice cream to be sold in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)," using the UN's name for the West Bank and East Jerusalem, it began a storm in which Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, denounced the decision as "terrorism" and Foreign Minister [Yair Lapid called it](#) a "shameful surrender to anti-Semitism, to [the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement], and to all that is wrong with the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish discourse."

While the creamery has stuck to its guns, parent company [Unilever reiterated](#) it was "fully committed" to maintaining business dealings with Israel. On Wednesday, the founders of Ben & Jerry's - Bennett Cohen and Jerry Greenfield - penned an op-ed in the [New York Times](#) defending the decision by the company over which they have no legal control, but also clarifying what the move was and wasn't.

"The company's stated decision to more fully align its operations with its values is not a rejection of Israel," the two men wrote. "It is a rejection of Israeli policy, which perpetuates an illegal occupation that is a barrier to peace and violates the basic human rights of the Palestinian people who live under the occupation. As Jewish supporters of the State of Israel, we



fundamentally reject the notion that it is anti-Semitic to question the policies of the State of Israel.”

“The decision to halt sales outside Israel’s democratic borders is not a boycott of Israel. Ben & Jerry’s statement did not endorse the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement,” they added, referring to the [movement calling for](#) a total refusal to buy Israeli products or products made in Israel or the UN-designated Occupied Territories.

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US Senate Votes to Go Forward on Hotly Contested \$1 Trillion Infrastructure Bill  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) said Wednesday that he hoped to pass both the bipartisan infrastructure bill and a budget framework before lawmakers leave for their August recess on August 9. “It might take some long nights. It might eat into our weekends, but we are going to get the job done and we are on track,” he said.

The US Senate voted 67-32 to move forward on the massive infrastructure bill Wednesday after reaching an agreement about transit funding that stalled an earlier test vote on the bill.

The amount the two sides agreed to was \$987 billion, but it could reach \$1.2 trillion if extended for eight years. However, they await a final price tag from the Congressional Budget Office. However, some of its provisions, according to [the White House](#), include \$110 billion toward roads, bridges, and other major projects; \$11 billion for transportation safety programs; \$39 billion to modernize transit and improve accessibility for disabled and elderly people; \$66 billion toward railroad projects; \$7.5 billion for a national network of electric vehicle charging stations; and \$73 billion towards power infrastructure and clean energy transmission; \$21 billion for environmental remediation; and \$73 billion toward clean drinking water, among other expenses. According to the Associated Press, which cited a Republican budget summary, the bill would be paid for in part with \$56 billion in increased tax revenue brought in by economic growth, but also \$205 billion in unused COVID-19 relief aid created by the American Rescue Plan in March 2021 and \$53 billion previously set aside for unemployment insurance that several state governments have [decided to close early](#).

The bill is a rarity in the 117th Congress, which has so far excelled mostly at gumming up the works on bills incapable of defeating a Republican filibuster in the Senate, which can permanently stall a bill's progress if a two-thirds majority cannot be gathered to override it. The threat of a filibuster has been so severe over the last seven months that many Democrats have taken to calling on US President Joe Biden to end the filibuster, which isn't a constitutionally mandated rule of the Senate. He has [thus far declined](#), insisting that bipartisanship is the only way forward.

Speaking Wednesday afternoon in Pennsylvania, Biden said after hearing that a deal could soon be reached that “while there's a lot we don't agree on, I believe that we should be able to work together on the few things we do agree on.”

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UK Defence Secretary Clashes With Labour Over Johnson's £250 Million 'Vanity Yacht' Project by [Evan Craighead](#)

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced plans earlier this year to construct a new royal vessel as the successor to the Royal Yacht Britannia, the national flagship decommissioned in 1997. At the time, Johnson envisioned the new national flagship as a reflection of "the UK's burgeoning status as a great, independent maritime trading nation."

While speaking in Greenwich, south London, on Wednesday, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace countered so-called inaccurate claims recently made about Johnson's "floating embassy."

"There has been a lot of reporting around this ship. Not all of it accurate," [he remarked](#) at a 'National Flagship Engagement Day' event. "So let me set out our basic aims. Subject to working through bids, competition and technology, I aim to commission the ship for between £200m and £250m [at a] firm price."

Wallace emphasized that the vessel would be completely "built by British hands," with a "British-led design."

Johnson also defended his position on Wednesday, telling LBC London that the national flagship will serve as a hub to showcase British businesses to wealthy investors across the globe.

"We need somewhere where the UK can show itself off to the world and attract investment and that will drive jobs and growth in the UK – not just in shipbuilding but across every sector of the UK," [he said](#).

Funds for the project would come from the Ministry of Defence budget.

Shadow Home Secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds argued that Johnson has "lost control of his vanity yacht" initiative, which initially had a £150 million price tag, according to the government's ['National Flagship Procurement' document](#).

"It is absolutely staggering that costs have rocketed by £100m in a week," the Labour Party lawmaker remarked. "Labour would scrap the government's latest pet project and invest taxpayers' money wisely to tackle crime and the surge in antisocial behaviour under this Conservative government."

The project was first announced back in May 2021, with Johnson describing the royal flagship as "the first vessel of its kind in the world."

"Every aspect of the ship, from its build to the businesses it showcases on board, will represent and promote the best of British - a clear and powerful symbol of our commitment to be an active player on the world stage," [the UK prime minister said](#).

[The UK government argued](#) the design and construction of the ship would "reinvigorate" the UK shipbuilding industry. Additionally, the vessel could be used for ministerial talks and diplomatic discussions.

Critics, such as First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, have suggested that Johnson has ulterior motives behind his push for a new royal flagship.



"The only reason Boris Johnson has been talking about this is to try to distract attention from the sleaze that is swirling around him and his government," Sturgeon said in May. Nevertheless, July 28 marks the beginning of the UK government's national flagship project, with officials now inviting investors to make competing bids until October. A winner will be announced in December.

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'Fancy Prison Cell': Take a Look at Kanye West's Makeshift Bedroom at the ATL Mercedes-Benz Stadium  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Shortly after rapper Kanye West hosted a listening party for his new album "Donda" at Atlanta United's Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, it was reported that the failed 2020 presidential hopeful actually converted parts of the downtown facility into a home studio and living space. Sources say Kanye plans to stay in Atlanta until August 6. West, 44, took to social media on Tuesday to give his fans, and the world, a behind-the-scenes look at his bedroom in the downtown Atlanta stadium. Heather Sautter, the director of corporate and marketing communications at MBS, previously [confirmed to local Atlanta outlet CBS46](#) that West reached out to the stadium regarding his use of the location for his upcoming album. In addition to converting the locker rooms into studio spaces, West also secured a full-time private chef and set up living quarters, complete with plants, [according to sources who spoke with TMZ](#). As of this article's publication, the image has amassed more than 1.6 million likes on Instagram, and thousands of comments from both confused and enthusiastic fans of the 44-year-old rapper. "Not even a window?" [questioned Instagram user couchluckas](#), while [user salad.snake applauded the rapper](#) and his "nice living quarters," saying they are "looking forward to [the] album of the century. Sautter also revealed that the officials with the Mercedes-Benz Stadium "did have to come up with a workaround for West with this past Saturday's Atlanta United game," which took place just two days after West's album listening party. The artist notably took a break from working on his album to briefly attend the soccer game. Social media users captured several flicks of the rapper donning what appeared to be a mask made of pantyhose material. While the 44-year-old's listening party was held in the stadium on Thursday, the album has not been released for mass consumption because it remains incomplete. A [representative for West has confirmed to Pitchfork](#) that "Donda," named after his late mother, will be released to the public on August 6. The polarizing rapper and failed politician is expected to move out of the downtown Atlanta stadium around the same time.

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US Gun Manufacturer Remington Offers \$33 Million to Settle Lawsuit of Sandy Hook Families  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month, lawyers representing the nine families of victims from the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting claimed that, after seven years of litigation, US gun manufacturer Remington was deliberately slowing the discovery process by submitting over 18,400 unrelated emojis and images, as well as some 15,000 additional image files.

A [Tuesday issuance from the legal team](#) of both Remington Arms Co. LLC and Remington Outdoors Co. Inc. detailed that the twice-bankrupt company would be offering each family \$3.66 million to "settle all claims inclusive of any fees and costs."

Lawyers for the family have said that they will "consider the next steps in moving forward" with the trial, which accuses the weapons manufacturer of engaging in shady marketing practices that praised the qualities of their rifles - one of which was used by the 20-year-old gunman in the 2012 Newtown, Connecticut, shooting.

The event left 20 children and six adults dead.

The offer comes weeks after lawyers representing the family [filed a complaint](#) earlier this month, accusing the manufacturer of refusing to "comply with their discovery obligations."

"Remington has treated discovery like a game," the complaint reads. "Unwilling to have this case decided by a jury on the merits with a full record, Remington has sought delay and obfuscation at every turn."

While the lawsuit has been active since 2014, Remington has endured two bankruptcies since then, with the latest filing resulting in an automatic, one-year stay of the court proceedings. The order was recently lifted in June.

Remington also appealed to the Supreme Court in 2019 to reverse the Connecticut Supreme Court decision to allow the case to go to trial. However, the SCOTUS denied the case.

Jury selection for the case is scheduled to take place in September.

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US Gymnast Simone Biles Puts Mental Health Center Stage After Withdrawal From Second Olympic Event  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Dominating the world of gymnastics, champion gold medalist Simone Biles recently left many viewers stunned after opting to pull out of two Olympic events in order to focus on her mental health. The famed gymnast has been facing an overwhelming amount of pressure to win gold on the global stage.



Having withdrawn from two events at the Tokyo Olympics, American gymnast Simone Biles has become one of the most instantly recognizable athletes to have helped place the importance of mental health at the forefront of conversations within the sportsworld.

A prominent figure within the world of gymnastics, Biles has spent much of the last several days shedding light on the pressures placed on top-ranked athletes. In fact, she has spent much of her time explaining to reporters the heavy emotional toll brought on by these Summer Games that was at the root of her decision to pull out from the individual all-around competition on Wednesday.

The withdrawal came just one day after the reigning Olympic champion decided to remove herself from the team finals on Tuesday after uncharacteristically failing to stick her landing on vault.

At the time, Biles explained during a conference after the Tuesday event that she withdrew herself because the mental focus needed in order to deliver her best was simply "not there." "I just felt like it would be a little bit better to take a back seat, work on my mindfulness," Biles stated. "And I knew that the girls would do an absolutely great job. And I didn't want to risk the team a medal for kind of my screwups, because they've worked way too hard for that."

Reports indicated that Biles would be attempting two full rotations on vault, however, the champion athlete was unable to do so. Biles wrote off the setback, noting she felt as though she "got a little bit lost in the air."

Analyzing her mental state and well-being, it was then that Biles opted to remove herself from the first event - the team final.

"And you usually don't hear me say things like that, because I'll usually persevere and push through things - but not to cost the team a medal," Biles said, recalling the moment she told her teammates and coaches that she needed to sit the event out. "So they were like, 'OK, well, if Simone says this, then we need to take it pretty serious.' So I had the correct people around me to do that."

Although the team did manage to clinch silver medals, the all-too constant feelings of pressure remained. Biles detailed during the Tuesday conference that the 2020 Games have been "really stressful," reiterating [past comments](#) she made over the weekend after taking a few stumbles during the Olympic qualifiers.

A subsequent statement released by USA Gymnastics indicated that Biles would be "assessed daily to determine medical clearance for future competitions." However, an assessment the following day concluded that she would also not be participating in the individual all-around event.

"After further medical evaluation, Simone Biles has withdrawn from the final individual all-around competition," USA Gymnastics announced early Wednesday. "We wholeheartedly support Simone's decision and applaud her bravery in prioritizing her well-being."

"Her courage shows, yet again, why she is a role model for so many," the group added.

Prior to the Wednesday announcement, Biles had underscored that her continued participation in the games would largely depend on her mental state the day of events. "I have to focus on my mental health and not jeopardize my health and well-being," she said.

It's worth noting that unlike other headlining events at the Olympics such as swimming, where a bad mental state may see a swimmer fall back on their pace, gymnasts face severe injuries and the threat of becoming paralyzed in the event they lose their footing.

The dangers of gymnastics were regrettably highlighted with the case of American gymnast Julissa Gomez, a then 15-year-old athlete who slipped and broke her neck while practicing a vault at the World Sports Fair in Japan in the late 1980s.

The devastating fall, which saw Gomez momentarily stop breathing, lose consciousness and slip into a coma, left her permanently paralyzed from the neck down. She [died](#) three years later. Robert Andrews, who served as Biles' mental training consultant for some five years, told the Wall Street Journal for a [Wednesday story](#) that "if her brain decided to shut off midair, that could be horrific for her."

Biles' spot in the individual all-around will see fellow American gymnast Jade Carey sub in for the competition. The decorated Olympic athlete had won the all-around event at the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro, and potentially could have been the first woman in over 50 years to win back-to-back titles.

#### Athletes Weigh In Amid Growing Spotlight on Mental Health

Michael Phelps, who is one of the most decorated Olympians with over 20 medals, weighed in on Biles' latest withdrawal and [revealed](#) to NBC's "Today" show on Wednesday that the light shed on mental health by Biles should be used as an "opportunity for all of us to really learn more about mental health."

"For me, I want people to be able to have somebody that can support them, who's non-judgmental and who is willing to hold space," he remarked. "There's a lot that we can do to help one another and we have to start. We can't brush it under the rug anymore."

In follow-up remarks to the outlet, Phelps stressed that efforts by Biles and other athletes to speak on their mental health would help to effectively provide a solid support system within the sports world.

Phelps, who has served as a mental health awareness advocate and been vocal about his own hurdles, further underscored that the pressure can at times be "overwhelming" for athletes, and that it can come from "absolutely everywhere," especially during competition.

Earlier, former Olympic gold-winning gymnasts Nastia Liukin and Gabby Douglas both acknowledged the mental struggles posed by the sport, opting to encourage fans and viewers to offer their support over criticism.

And that's not all: support and acknowledgement of the difficulties has trickled in across social media, including from Dominique Moceanu, who competed in the 1996 Olympics Games despite having landed on her head during a balance beam routine. US gymnast Kerri Strug, who also competed in the 1996 Games and injured her ankle during the events, [offered her support](#).

Even pop sensation Justin Bieber took to [Instagram](#) to acknowledge Biles' bravery in the face of hardship. "Sometimes our no's are more powerful than our yes's. When what you normally love starts to steal your joy it's important we take a step back to evaluate why," he wrote.

Biles' recent comments on mental health come as tennis superstar Naomi Osaka has also been vocal on the importance of hitting a mental pause. In fact, Osaka [withdrew](#) from the French Open after clashing with officials for skipping conferences in order to mentally readjust.

The American gymnast told reporters after the Tuesday event that she was encouraged to withdraw by Osaka's own decisions to prioritize her well-being over sport.



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Proposition 47 & California's Crime Rates: How One Law Hasn't Legalized Theft Under \$950  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several months, viral videos have surfaced showing various instances in which shoplifters have walked into a retail store only to mosey on out moments later with tagged merchandise. The sudden rise in such footage has prompted a wave of critics to wrongly blame the events on none other than California's Proposition 47.

California's Proposition 47 has recently taken a slew of hits from critics who have quickly blamed the passage of the legislation, which was originally passed by voters in 2014, for allowing the rise in shoplifting cases.

Multiple videos have been emerging across social media that document cases in which either one offender or a bevy of individuals have targeted a retail outlet and ransacked the consumer goods.

One video post uploaded online showed Lyanne Melendez, an ABC reporter filming away alongside a store's security guard as an individual is seen in the foreground stuffing items into a garbage bag. Although the pair continue to film away, neither truly intervene in the situation, with the guard only momentarily attempting to grab the bag as the robber bikes his way out of the store.

In another video clip, two individuals are filmed coolly walking out of a T.J. Maxx in Granada Hills, California, with bags filled with items, as well as clothing that were still on hangars. Comedian Adam Carolla shared the footage with a caption that laid blame on Proposition 47. And just like that, a fire ball of blame was ignited.

Another post shared online earlier this month only helped to push the narrative as it famously captured the moment when several robbers carried out a smash-and-grab operation at luxury department store Neiman Marcus located in San Francisco's Union Square.

[Footage](#) shared of the aftermath captured emptied shelves and shattered glass display cases, although some merchandise is still visible.

The dollar amount of the store's loss is unclear, but one could easily speculate the cost was hefty. Incidentally, a similar operation was carried out at another Neiman Marcus in Palo Alto in late May. Local reports [indicate](#) that the Palo Alto robbery saw about \$150,000 worth of stolen merchandise.

With theft operations escalating, retailers have either been forced to shutter some of their operations, whereas others, like Target, chose to modify their hours in the hopes that it would dissuade would-be shoplifters.

No, It's Not Prop 47's Fault

While Carolla stated that Proposition 47 allowed shoplifters to commit their crimes as long as the dollar amount remained under \$950, he was entirely wrong about the case. In fact, the legislation actually modified sentencing for nonviolent property crimes, effectively making it a misdemeanor for petty theft.

If one were to closely [review the legislation](#), they would in fact find that Proposition 47 punishes petty theft under \$950 by up to six months in county jail.

“What Prop 47 did is increase the dollar amount by which theft can be prosecuted as a felony from \$400 to \$950 to adjust for inflation and cost of living,” Alex Bastian, a special advisor to Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascón who also helped co-write the legislation, [told](#) the Associated Press.

“But most shoplifting cases are under \$400 dollars to begin with, so before Prop 47 and after Prop 47, there isn’t any difference.”

Charis Kubrin, a criminology professor who analyzed the effects of Proposition 47, further explained to the outlet that the law was actually signed off in order to comply with a 2011 declaration from the California Supreme Court that stated overcrowded prisons violated the Eighth Amendment right of imprisoned individuals.

As for the clamp down on massive orchestrated retail theft, such as the Neiman Marcus incidents, California Gov. Gavin Newsom has [signed](#) into law literature that would allow prosecutors to either charge those offenses as a misdemeanor or a felony.

However, it’s worth noting that California isn’t the only state that has instituted laws redefining the threshold for criminal theft. [Findings](#) by Snopes determined that since 2000, nearly 40 US states have raised the mark on such offenses.

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US Plans to Sanction Iran's Drones, Guided Missiles - Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration plans to impose a new package of sanctions against Iran’s evolving capabilities for precision-strike drones and guided missiles, despite ongoing negotiations on the nuclear program, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on Thursday, citing unnamed US officials.

The sanctions come in response to growing US concerns over the threat that these weapons increasingly pose to US forces and their allies in the Middle East, according to the report.

“Iran’s drones are becoming an increasing threat to our allies in the region,” a US official said, as cited by the report.

The new sanctions campaign will target Iran’s procurement networks, including suppliers of parts used to build drones and guided missiles, in a bid to disrupt Tehran’s strike capabilities, US officials said.

The US officials said the new sanctions would be separate from other designations that Washington has offered to lift if Tehran returns to compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

Earlier in July, WSJ reported that the Biden administration was considering imposing new sanctions on Iran’s oil deliveries to China if Tehran decides to withdraw from nuclear talks, the sixth round of which ended on June 20.



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**US Jobless Claims Hit 400,000 For Second Week in Row Amid COVID Challenges - Labor Dept**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims stood at 400,000 and above for a second week in a row, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a continued challenge for the fragile labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending July 24, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 400,000," the Labor Department said in a statement. In the previous week to July 17, claims stood at 424,000.

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**US GDP Up by 6.5% in Second Quarter - Commerce Dept.**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product expanded by 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said on Thursday in its first reading for April-June growth amid the ongoing recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, reflecting the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments, and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic," the department said in a statement.

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**RPT: ANALYSIS - Diplomacy Key to Afghanistan's 'New Great Game' Amid Superpowers' Limited Military Options**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Diplomacy will play a major role in achieving stability in Afghanistan and across Central Asia with the United States lacking many military options as it pivots resources towards the Asia-Pacific and Russia reluctant to get stuck in another quagmire, all while doubts loom over the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) desire for a ceasefire, experts told Sputnik.

The next high-level meeting between the Taliban and Afghan delegations in the Qatari capital of Doha is expected to take place in August. Although negotiations appear to remain alive, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said earlier in July that he believes the Taliban have no desire to establish peace in Afghanistan.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Gen. Frank McKenzie disclosed last week that the United States has increased airstrikes against the Taliban in support of Afghan forces over the last several days and is prepared to continue them in the coming weeks if the Taliban continues its attacks.

#### DIPLOMACY 'NAME OF THE GAME'

The Taliban have made significant military gains in recent months amid the US troop withdrawal, which the Pentagon says is more than 95 percent complete - a campaign that has threatened Afghanistan's neighbors. Last week, the Taliban told Sputnik that it now controls 90% of Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran.

In a call last week, US President Joe Biden and Ghani said they agreed the Taliban's current offensive contradicts the movement's claim to support a negotiated settlement. On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned the Taliban that it will not gain the international recognition it seeks and lifting of sanctions if it takes over Afghanistan by force.

On Tuesday, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik Washington and Moscow have overlapping interests in Afghanistan and said it is important to launch the process of substantive negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban and form a new coalition transitional leadership.

"Diplomacy is the name of the New Belt and Road Great Game," foreign policy experts Elizabeth Gould and Paul Fitzgerald told Sputnik, referring to China's regional development initiative.

Gould and Fitzgerald were the first two Western journalists the Afghan communist government allowed back in the country during the 1980s. However, they do not believe the Taliban want to sustain the internecine warfare that has plagued the country since King Zahir Shah was ousted in a family coup in the early 1970s.

"The Taliban want legitimacy and a renewed civil war won't serve their goals," the authors of several books on Afghanistan said. "Neither will it serve Pakistan's long sought desire to control Afghanistan by keeping it in chaos - when it will only benefit by joining in a full partnership in the Belt and Road initiative."

History repeats itself as Afghanistan proves again to be a game changer for great powers and the United States is no exception, Gould and Fitzgerald added.

"Washington should come to grips that its role on the world stage has changed and accept the fact that its military empire has come to an end," Gould and Fitzgerald said. "All the US can do now is hinder Russia and China from succeeding. The US failure is colossal... Afghanistan is the roundabout of Central Asia. It's a key hub for trade and the US just lost it."

Russia has been projecting military power into Central Asia since 2012, which is expected given its historically strategic position in the region, but it is highly doubtful Moscow will be drawn into another quagmire in Afghanistan, especially after watching the United States withdraw, the authors said.

The Russian Central Military District said some one thousand Russian servicemen will take part in joint counterterrorism military drills in Tajikistan along with troops from Uzbekistan in August near the Tajik border with Afghanistan. More than 1,500 servicemen and around 300 units of weapons and military equipment from the three countries are set to be involved in the drills.



Michael O'Hanlon, who specializes in US defense strategy at the Brookings Institution, told Sputnik he expects the United States to prioritize finding ways for contractors to provide technical support and maintenance for the Afghan Air Force.

"Providing American airpower in support of Afghan police and soldiers in the event of a major Taliban attack would be a big help too, but also a big decision by President [Joe] Biden that I cannot confidently predict," O'Hanlon said.

#### DOUBTS OVER CEASEFIRE

Although a ceasefire seems a possible option for the Taliban, some say the likelihood of that happening is not very promising.

Last week, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said about half of the 419 district centers in Afghanistan are under Taliban control, but they have not taken over any of the 34 provincial capitals in the country.

O'Hanlon doubts international legitimacy is enough to persuade the Taliban to halt its advance.

"The ceasefire and Pakistan ideas are theoretically appealing but practically and pragmatically unpromising," O'Hanlon said. "It won't be enough by itself [legitimacy]. The Taliban think they are winning and think they will win - comprehensively and across the country. I am not sure they are right. But I am confident that is what they now believe. And our departure won't tend to change that view, I'm afraid."

O'Hanlon also warned that a Taliban takeover of Kabul could lead to the formation of a nation-wide caliphate with at least some toleration for the al-Qaeda terrorist group (outlawed in Russia).

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#### RPT - US Likely to Maintain Military Presence in Iraq to Pressure Iran - Ex-Diplomats

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will likely maintain some type of military presence in Iraq after US combat troops leave to pressure Iran and control the country's oil reserves, former diplomats and a UN adviser with postings or experience in the region told Sputnik.

On Monday, Biden told visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi at the White House that the US combat mission in Iraq would come to a close by the end of this year, although a remnant would stay behind in a train-assist role to counter the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia).

"It appears that the Biden administration plans to apply in Iraq the same method of control that it uses in North East Syria," former UK Ambassador to Syria Peter Ford said. "That is, a light military footprint on the ground to direct the work of a proxy force."

In Syria, the proxy force the US backs is the Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces, Ford added, and in Iraq it is the national army.

Ford said this will be supplemented by threats of airstrikes and economic firepower - including bribes to reward Iraqi political allies. Sanctions will also be used to deter any actions by Baghdad deemed harmful to US interests, he said.

"The move appears to follow the realization that a heavy ground presence is not only unnecessary when the same control can be achieved for less," Ford added.

The former UK diplomat also said it represents one of the aftershocks from the sanctions/tanker war of 2019 when the US attempted to starve Iran into submission by economic siege and Tehran retaliated by striking American client targets in Iraq and the Gulf.

"As such it must also be seen as part of the maneuvering over renewal of the Iran nuclear deal," Ford said.

A smaller US footprint in Iraq, he explained, may deplete Iran's inventory of targets, thus reducing Tehran's leverage in negotiations. Hence, it is highly likely, Ford said, that hawks in Washington will not try to stymie it as they did former President Donald Trump's attempt to exit Syria.

Former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman, however, believes the US leaving a non-combat footprint behind could still serve as a target.

"Biden's decision sets the stage for a further test. What is being withdrawn is combat troops. Forces not engaged in combat will remain and they will be a target for forces in Iraq determined to remove the American presence entirely. How will the remaining US troops be protected?" Freeman asked.

Former UN human rights adviser James Paul observed that nothing has been said about US-funded mercenaries, air force assets - including drones - based in Iraq and third countries like Jordan or the Gulf states.

"In short, the war continues - a war which is not only about controlling Iraq and its oil reserves but also about keeping pressure on Iran and seeking regime change there," Paul said.

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#### **More Whistleblowers Report Abuses at Migrant Child Intake Facility in Texas - Rights Group**

EL PASO, July 28 (Sputnik) - Additional whistleblowers have come forward to reveal abuses and poor conditions at a federal care facility for migrant children in the state of Texas, the Government Accountability Project said in a letter to the US administration and Congress.

"This is Government Accountability Project's second protected whistleblower disclosure concerning abuses and mismanagement at the Fort Bliss Emergency Intake Site (EIS) operated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)," the letter said on Wednesday.

The two additional whistleblowers named in the letter are Arthur Pearlstein, Director of Arbitration and of the Office of Shared Neutrals at the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, and Lauren Reinhold, an Attorney-Adviser at the Social Security Administration. The letter said private contractors, not federal employees, are essentially in charge of all operations at the facility.

Pearlstein and Reinhold, according to the testimony, spoke to dozens of children who had been at the facility for more than 30 days, some even exceeding 60 days, the letter said. Many of those children had not received an update from their case managers in over a month, while some migrant children had not been told they had a case manager.



In addition, the letter said hundreds of migrant children contracted COVID-19 because of the overcrowded conditions, which eventually spread to employees as well. The facility at Fort Bliss houses up to 1,200 migrant children.

Pearlstein interviewed dozens of migrant children who had symptoms of depression, including some with suicidal thoughts, the letter said. Some of the migrant children told him they felt like they were in prison and often begged to be let out because they could not take it anymore, some migrant children even tried to escape the facility, the letter added.

Some counselors were suited to help the migrant children, but there were others who had no prior training or expertise, the letter said.

Bullying was common in the facility and there were riots in some of the tents housing the migrant boys, the letter said.

The letter also pointed out that filth is commonplace in the facility, including shortages of undergarments and other clothing for the migrant children.

Pearlstein worked in the facility from April to June while Reinhold worked there for the month of May.

US Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement that as of Tuesday there are 1,982 migrant children in the custody of Customs and Border Protection and 13,833 migrant children in HHS care.

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#### US Senate Advances Trillion-Dollar Infrastructure Bill

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US Senate secured enough votes to limit debate on a near \$1 trillion infrastructure package.

The Senate on Wednesday voted 67-32 to advance the bipartisan infrastructure package.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he expects the upper chamber to pass the legislation before lawmakers leave for the August recess, which is scheduled for August 9.

This same bill failed to pass the procedural vote last week when Democrats and Republicans were still in middle of negotiating a deal on the package.

Earlier on Wednesday, a bipartisan group of senators, including Rob Portman, a Republican, and Kyrsten Sinema, a Democrat, agreed on a \$987 billion dollars package, which includes some \$550 billion in new federal spending.

The bill, whose price tag would reach \$1.2 trillion if extended for eight years, includes some \$40 billion on bridge repair and rehabilitation, while \$17.5 billion will be invested in projects that are either large or complex for traditional funding programs. Also, about \$39 billion will be invested to modernize transit and to improve accessibility for people with disabilities and for the elderly. Some \$73 billion will be devoted to clean drinking water and \$21 billion will go to environmental remediation.

Former President Donald Trump, who despite not holding any office continues to wield significant influence over the Republican Party, threatened GOP lawmakers with stiff opposition at primary elections should they go through with the deal.

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**US Awards Raytheon \$482Mln Air-to-Air Missile Contract - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US weapons manufacturer Raytheon won a contract modification worth more than \$482 million to deliver air-to-air missiles for the United States Air Force and five allied nations, the Pentagon said in a statement.

"Raytheon Missiles and Defense [in] Tucson, Arizona, has been awarded a \$482,895,193 modification... contract for Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM) Production Lot 35," the department said in a press release on Wednesday. "This contract involves unclassified Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Canada, Hungary, Korea, Netherlands, and Qatar, which accounts for 28 percent of the contract value."

The contract also includes the manufacture and provision of AMRAAM Telemetry System, initial and field spares, and other production engineering support hardware and activities, the release added.

Work on the contract will be performed in Tucson, Arizona over the next three years with an expected completion date of May 31, 2024, the release noted.

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**Parents in US Homeschooling Up to 15Mln Children During Coronavirus Pandemic - Association**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans choosing to homeschool their children is rapidly increasing and up to 15 million children are currently homeschooled in the United States, Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) senior counsel Michael Donnelly told Sputnik.

"The most recent US Census Pulse Survey numbers suggest that as many as 18 percent of US households have had at least one homeschooled student. These numbers, in addition to state filings, suggest that homeschooling has at least doubled and may have tripled during the pandemic. This would mean that anywhere between 6-15 million children are being homeschooled," Donnelly said.

The senior counsel explained that HSLDA is one of the oldest and biggest non-profit groups in the United States protecting homeschooling families over the past 35 years and equipping them to provide the best educational experience for their children.

Donnelly said school lockdowns that were part of the coronavirus pandemic measures gave many people an opportunity to try some form of homeschooling.



"Reports from homeschool curriculum companies and what we are seeing with our own membership suggest that rather than declining, interest in homeschooling is growing. Families from every walk of life are turning to homeschooling," he said.

The interest for some form of homeschooling is growing most rapidly among African and Hispanic families, reflecting 16 percent and 12 percent, respectively, Donnelly added.

#### APPEAL FOR A RETURN TO SCHOOLS

Donnelly said the public health situation has allowed the schools to reopen and local officials across the United States have renewed efforts to recruit homeschoolers back to school because student enrollment determines funding levels.

"The frequency of these attempts appears to have increased this year and HSLDA has reported on the efforts by schools in several states to offer publicly funded programs that are delivered virtually. Some schools have tried to market these programs as homeschooling even though they are public school programs," he said.

However, Donnelly pointed out that homeschooling is privately funded and parent directed. Most of the attempts to persuade parents to return their children to school are not forceful, so the homeschoolers are not facing significant challenges, but school officials at times exceed their authorities, he said.

"There are issues when school officials demand information they are not entitled to or unlawfully obstruct the parents' decision to homeschool. The best thing new homeschool families can do is get support from local homeschooling groups," Donnelly said, adding that HSLDA represents its members in resolving such disputes and even goes to court if necessary.

#### BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Donnelly said one of the benefits of homeschooling, particularly during the pandemic, is having a learning environment without the use of face masks and physical-social distancing and one in which health risks are mitigated. He also said that homeschooling parents have more control over their schedules and explore a wider range of subjects that are of interest to the students.

"Because homeschooling is so efficient, children can learn the material more quickly and have time to pursue other areas of interest," he said.

However, Donnelly also said this kind of learning requires families to adapt their schedules and find time to ensure that children are receiving the attention they need to progress academically.

Donnelly expressed confidence that even working parents can readjust their plans and help their children to learn. Citing the data from recent surveys, he noted that homeschooling has grown fastest among low income communities.

The HSLDA representative said abundance of materials and information is one of the challenges of homeschooling.

"Finding the right curriculum can take time and with so many options some parents can feel at a loss as to which curriculum to choose. I always say pick the one you like, or select among subject specific curriculum, and then see how it goes," Donnelly said. "If it works - great. If it's not working, try something new."

Homeschooling has been legal in all 50 US states since 1993. The percentage of homeschooled students changed from 3-4 percent to more than 9 percent in 2020, according various surveys.

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**Trump Blasts Senate Republicans for 'Terrible' Infrastructure Deal - Statement**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump has blasted Senate Republicans for striking a deal with Democratic counterparts on a near \$1 trillion infrastructure package.

Earlier in the day, a bipartisan group of senators, including Rob Portman, a Republican, and Kyrsten Sinema, a Democrat, agreed on a \$987 billion dollars package, which includes some \$550 billion in new federal spending.

"Hard to believe our Senate Republicans are dealing with the Radical Left Democrats in making a so-called bipartisan bill on 'infrastructure'... This will be a victory for the Biden Administration and Democrats, and will be heavily used in the 2022 election. It is a loser for the USA, a terrible deal, and makes the Republicans look weak, foolish, and dumb," Trump said in a statement on Wednesday.

Trump, in particular, took aim at Republican senator Mitt Romney, who he called a "super RINO" acronym for "Republican In Name Only," a term used to describe Republicans who are perceived to legislate like democrats.

Trump, who despite not holding any office continues to wield significant influence over the Republican Party, threatened GOP lawmakers with stiff opposition at primary elections should they go through with the deal.

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**US Likely to Maintain Military Presence in Iraq to Pressure Iran - Ex-Diplomats**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will likely maintain some type of military presence in Iraq after US combat troops leave to pressure Iran and control the country's oil reserves, former diplomats and a UN adviser with postings or experience in the region told Sputnik.

On Monday, Biden told visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi at the White House that the US combat mission in Iraq would come to a close by the end of this year, although a remnant would stay behind in a train-assist role to counter the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia).



"It appears that the Biden administration plans to apply in Iraq the same method of control that it uses in North East Syria," former UK Ambassador to Syria Peter Ford said. "That is, a light military footprint on the ground to direct the work of a proxy force."

In Syria, the proxy force the US backs is the Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces, Ford added, and in Iraq it is the national army.

Ford said this will be supplemented by threats of airstrikes and economic firepower - including bribes to reward Iraqi political allies. Sanctions will also be used to deter any actions by Baghdad deemed harmful to US interests, he said.

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The former UK diplomat also said it represents one of the aftershocks from the sanctions/tanker war of 2019 when the US attempted to starve Iran into submission by economic siege and Tehran retaliated by striking American client targets in Iraq and the Gulf.

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A smaller US footprint in Iraq, he explained, may deplete Iran's inventory of targets, thus reducing Tehran's leverage in negotiations. Hence, it is highly likely, Ford said, that hawks in Washington will not try to stymie it as they did former President Donald Trump's attempt to exit Syria.

Former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman, however, believes the US leaving a non-combat footprint behind could still serve as a target.

"Biden's decision sets the stage for a further test. What is being withdrawn is combat troops. Forces not engaged in combat will remain and they will be a target for forces in Iraq determined to remove the American presence entirely. How will the remaining US troops be protected?" Freeman asked.

Former UN human rights adviser James Paul observed that nothing has been said about US-funded mercenaries, air force assets - including drones - based in Iraq and third countries like Jordan or the Gulf states.

"In short, the war continues - a war which is not only about controlling Iraq and its oil reserves but also about keeping pressure on Iran and seeking regime change there," Paul said.

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**Some 67% of US Counties Have Substantial to High Coronavirus Transmissibility - CDC**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Almost 67 percent of counties in the United States have between substantial and high coronavirus transmission rates, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cautioned a day after re-introducing its masking recommendation in high-risk areas as well as in schools.

A CDC chart showed 3,219 counties surveyed for transmissibility and of these, some 1,608 or 49.94 percent were regarded as having a "high" level of community transmission. Another 537,

or 16.68 percent, were found to have a "substantial" risk of transmission. Together, the two groups accounted for 66.6 percent of the total.

As per CDC guidance, substantial transmission risk means at least 50 new cases per 100,000 people in the last seven days, while high transmission is more than 100 cases per 100,000 people over the last week.

US coronavirus infections have quadrupled over the past months, according to CDC data. New cases stood at 53,772 on July 26, with an average 7-day moving case rate of 56,816, compared with the June 26 new caseload of 12,552 and 7-day average of 12,471.

Health officials say fully-vaccinated individuals could be carriers of the coronavirus' Delta variant that is more transmissible and can affect the unvaccinated.

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**Fed Says Now Not Time to Hike US Rate, Will Continue to Buy Bonds to Support Economy**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The time is not right yet to raise US interest rates as the Federal Reserve is still focused on buying bonds to support an economy recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, Chairman Jerome Powell said.

"Right now, it's not the ideal time to think about raising interest rates; instead, the Fed is focusing on asset purchases," Powell said on Wednesday, referring to the central bank's monthly commitment of \$120 billion to support the economy. "In an ideal world, you wouldn't boost rates before starting to taper."

The Federal Reserve left the interest rates unchanged after a two-day policy meeting for July held by its Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC). US rates have been kept at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent by the FOMC since the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020. Powell cautioned that US inflation could run higher and more persistent in the near term than forecast as the economy adjusts to bottlenecks caused by the pandemic.

"Inflation could turn out to be higher and more persistent than we expect," Powell said. "It's clear that at this time inflation is actually running above 2 percent, has been and will be at least we expect in coming months before returning down toward our target."

Powell said the FOMC indicated at the July meeting that it would continue to buy at least \$80 billion of Treasury securities and \$40 billion of agency mortgage-backed securities each month until it achieves "substantial further progress" in its target for maximum employment among Americans and sustainable inflation.

The US economy grew by an annualized rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures.

The Federal Reserve has said it envisions a 6.5 percent expansion for all of this year, although some officials at the central bank have more ambitious expectations, forecasting growth of up to 7 percent.



However, prices have soared and the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index - the Federal Reserve's preferred gauge for inflation - increased by a multiyear high of 3.7 percent in the 12 months to June when stripped of volatile food and energy prices.

The US Consumer Price Index, a more popular inflation gauge used worldwide, grew by 5.4 percent over a one-year period in June for its largest increase in 13 years.

The Federal Reserve has acknowledged the price pressures but said they are transitory and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) -

#### US-RUSSIA TALKS

\* If the United States really wants to deal with cybercrimes and Internet ransomware, it could use the 1999 mutual legal assistance treaty with Russia, bearing in mind, however, Moscow's principled position not to extradite its citizens, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

\* Russia and the United States have not yet agreed that defensive and offensive, nuclear and non-nuclear weapons would be discussed at the talks on strategic stability, Ryabkov said.

\* The delegations of Russia and the United States at a meeting in Geneva discussed the issue of creating working groups on the topic of strategic stability, but this is not a matter of today, Ryabkov said.

\* At the negotiations on cybersecurity, the United States is trying to highlight only the problem of ransomware, ignoring Russia's concerns in this area, Ryabkov said following consultations in Geneva.

\* The negotiations on strategic stability between the Russian and the US delegations in Geneva were professional, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

#### US SANCTIONS AGAINST SYRIA

\* The US Department of Treasury has unveiled a number of fresh Syria-related sanctions targeting prisons and individuals involved in alleged rights abuses, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

#### AFGHANISTAN

\* The Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia) is making advances in Afghanistan, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday, adding that reports of atrocities committed in areas controlled by militants are "troubling."

\* The US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan will naturally trigger consequences, but there is no need to assess whether it is good or bad, since in diplomacy one deals with what one has, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said.

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with permanent members of the Security Council on Wednesday to discuss social and economic issues, the situation in Afghanistan and the latest developments on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said,

#### US ECONOMY

\* The Federal Reserve has decided to leave US interest rates at near zero range and continue with its monthly \$120 billion bond program until employment and inflation nears its targets, the central bank said at the close of its July policy meeting on Wednesday.

\* US inflation could run higher and be more persistent in the near term than forecast as the economy adjusts to bottlenecks caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said.

\* The time is not right yet for raising US interest rates as the Federal Reserve is still focused on buying bonds to support an economy recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, Powell said,

#### CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

\* The efficacy of Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine slips to 84 percent after six months, a new report revealed by medRxiv showed on Wednesday.

\* About 20 million Russians went through the full cycle of vaccination against the coronavirus with the Sputnik V vaccine, about 1 million with EpiVacCorona and about 300,000 with CoviVac, chief public health official Anna Popova said.

#### FOREST FIRE IN TURKEY

\* The massive forest fire in Turkey's Antalya province injured at least 53 people on Wednesday, Agriculture and Forestry Minister Bekir Pakdemirli said.

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#### UN to Issue Humanitarian Response Plan for Central America in September - US Official

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will issue a humanitarian response plan in September to address issues that are driving a surge of asylum-seeking migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to come to the United States, a senior US administration official said during a conference call.

"The United Nations is going to issue a humanitarian response plan in September," the official told reporters.

The official added that Japan, South Korea, Israel and a number of other countries have agreed to increase engagement in Central America and over 150 US businesses have expressed interest in investing in the region as well in order to help improve life in the Northern Triangle countries.



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#### **US House Committee Approves Bipartisan Legislation Expanding Rural Broadband Access**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Legislation designed to remove barriers to expanding internet access to rural communities won bipartisan approval in the US House Transportation Committee, the panel announced on Wednesday.

"H.R. 3193 removes hurdles for broadband projects under Economic Development Administration (EDA) grants, including difficult last-mile efforts that often delay rural broadband deployment," the Transportation Committee said in a press release.

The measure also ensures that local communities can partner with the private sector in carrying out broadband projects and still meet requirements for matching federal subsidies, the release said.

"It doesn't matter how old you are or where you live, Americans of all walks of life use the internet for everything, from precision agriculture, to telemedicine, to school and work," the committee's ranking Republican Sam Graves said in the release.

Just 22.3 percent of Americans in rural areas and 27.7 percent of Americans in Tribal lands lack coverage from fixed terrestrial broadband with download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 3 Mbps, a recent report by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) said.

In contrast, just 1.5 percent of Americans in urban areas lack comparable high-speed internet access, according to the FCC.

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#### **Police Respond to Gunshot Near Federal Courthouse in Downtown Denver - Reports**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Police is responding to a shooting situation in Denver, Colorado, after a gunshot was reported in the city's downtown area, local media said on Wednesday.

The incident took place near the federal courthouse in the afternoon, the report said.

Police told FOX31 News that a single gunshot was reported. No injuries have so far been reported, but several vehicles belonging to first responders are on the scene, the report added.

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#### **Pentagon Orders Staff, Visitors to Wear Masks at DoD Facilities - Spokesperson**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon is mandating that all staff and visitors wear face masks at Department of Defense facilities in accordance with updated US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidance, spokesperson Jamal Brown said on Wednesday.

"Deputy Secretary [Kathleen] Hicks has directed that all individuals, regardless of vaccination status, wear masks in indoor settings at Department of Defense installations and facilities in areas of substantial or high transmission, as defined by the CDC, to protect against rising COVID-19 cases," Brown said in a statement.

The directive applies to all service members, federal personnel, contractors, and visitors, the statement said.

The CDC said on Tuesday that it was reintroducing its recommendation for masking, including for vaccinated people, in new COVID-19-prone areas as the United States is experiencing a resurgence of new infections.

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**Blinken Affirms to WHO Chief US Support for More Covid Origin Studies - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed Washington's support of additional studies on the COVID-19 origins to World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus during a meeting in Kuwait, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary Blinken affirmed US support for the WHO's plans to conduct additional studies into the COVID-19 origins, including in the People's Republic of China, to better understand the current pandemic and prevent future ones," Price said in a readout. "He stressed the need for the next phase to be timely, evidence-based, transparent, expert-led, and free from interference."

Blinken and Tedros also discussed bilateral cooperation and reforms of the WHO, Price added. They expressed bilateral commitments to work together and with other countries to make meaningful, concrete progress in strengthening global health security to prevent, detect, and respond to future pandemics and health threats, he noted.

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**Republicans Threaten to Block 2 US Treasury Nominees Over Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - Reports**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - A total of 12 Republicans on the US Senate Banking Committee threatened to block the nomination of Brian Nelson and Elizabeth Rosenberg to the Treasury Department unless President Joe Biden's administration reverses its position on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, media reported on Wednesday.

According to a letter, seen by Bloomberg and addressed to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Senator Pat Toomey and 11 other Republicans said the pipeline harms the United States and its



allies' national security interests, and, if completed, would destabilize Ukraine's security, encourage further "Russian aggression" and increase Moscow's "malign" influence over Europe. Last week, Germany and the United States - the pipeline's biggest supporter and opponent in the West, respectively - signed a deal allowing for the unhindered completion of Nord Stream 2. The United States committed to refraining from sanctions against the gas project, while Germany vowed to ensure that Russia does not use the pipeline as a weapon. The deal also committed the sides to facilitate a ten-year extension of Russia's gas transit agreement with Ukraine.

The senators said they would oppose Nelson's and Rosenberg's nominations to oversee sanction implementations unless the course that the Biden administration has taken on Nord Stream 2 is reversed.

If all 12 Republicans oppose the nominations, a floor vote will be necessary, with at least one Democratic senator rejecting the nominations, to discharge the nominees.

The Nord Stream 2 project, which is 99 percent completed, provides for the construction of a 745-mile offshore twin pipeline aimed to supply up to 1.9 trillion cubic feet of gas per year from Russia directly to Germany. Ukraine and several eastern European member states, benefiting from the transit of EU-bound Russian gas, called on the European Union to abandon the project, citing the bloc's perceived over-dependence on Moscow.

Russia has insisted that the project is entirely commercial, urging critics to stop politicizing Nord Stream 2.

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#### **US Charges Unlicensed Broker With Defrauding 20 Investors of Over \$2Mln - Regulator**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - An unlicensed US securities' broker faces fraud charges for raising more than \$2 million from novice investors and promising to more than double their returns, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Wednesday.

"The SEC's complaint, filed in the US District Court for the Western District of Michigan, alleges that [Joshua] Rupp engaged in a fraudulent investment scheme from January 2018 through July 2019, which included misstatements, false documents and misappropriation of investor funds," the regulator said in a press release.

According to the complaint, Rupp raised over \$2.2 million from about 20 investors who lacked significant investment experience by misrepresenting that he was a licensed securities professional, he would generate profits for investors by trading on their behalf and investors' principal was protected from losses, the release said.

In the process, Rupp provided false account statements and trading data to make it appear that his trading was generating returns as high as 115 percent, the release also said.

Instead, investors lost most of their money, including retirement funds, through Rupp's fraud, the release added.

The SEC complaint charges Rupp with violating anti-fraud provisions of the federal securities laws and seeks disgorgement of ill-gotten gains plus interest, a penalty and injunctive relief, according to the release.

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#### **Republican Lawmakers Defy Mask Mandate in US House Imposed By Pelosi**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Wednesday's session on the US House floor featured several Republican lawmakers with faces exposed in defiance of an order from Speaker Nancy Pelosi that everyone wear masks due the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), risking fines in the process.

Congressman Chip Roy raged over the rule by citing the admission of coronavirus positive migrants crossing the southern border into his home state of Texas.

"While we have thousands of people pouring across our border and Democrats don't do a darn thing about it, heavily infected with COVID-19," Roy said. "We are absolutely sick and tired of it and so are the American people."

As Roy spoke, mask-less Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene looked on. Other mask-less Republicans cited in a report by The Hill included Lauren Boebert, Matt Gaetz, Andy Biggs, Mary Miller and Andrew Clyde, although most Republicans appeared to comply with the latest mandate.

The House first instituted a mask requirement last year, with \$500 fines for a first offense and \$2,500 for each subsequent violation. However that mandate ended in June when the Capitol physician announced that fully vaccinated lawmakers need not cover their faces.

On Tuesday, the CDC cited the contagious delta coronavirus variant in issuing new guidance urging vaccinated people in areas of the country with high rates of transmission to wear masks when indoors.

The high-transmission designation applied to Washington, DC, and Pelosi responded by imposing a new mask requirement Wednesday morning.

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#### **ANALYSIS - Diplomacy Key to Afghanistan's 'New Great Game' Amid Superpowers' Limited Military Options**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Diplomacy will play a major role in achieving stability in Afghanistan and across Central Asia with the United States lacking many military options as it pivots resources towards the Asia-Pacific and Russia reluctant to get stuck in another quagmire, all while doubts loom over the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) desire for a ceasefire, experts told Sputnik.

The next high-level meeting between the Taliban and Afghan delegations in the Qatari capital of Doha is expected to take place in August. Although negotiations appear to remain alive, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said earlier in July that he believes the Taliban have no desire to establish peace in Afghanistan.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Gen. Frank McKenzie disclosed last week that the United States has increased airstrikes against the Taliban in support of Afghan forces over the last several days and is prepared to continue them in the coming weeks if the Taliban continues its attacks.

#### DIPLOMACY 'NAME OF THE GAME'

The Taliban have made significant military gains in recent months amid the US troop withdrawal, which the Pentagon says is more than 95 percent complete - a campaign that has threatened Afghanistan's neighbors. Last week, the Taliban told Sputnik that it now controls 90% of Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran.

In a call last week, US President Joe Biden and Ghani said they agreed the Taliban's current offensive contradicts the movement's claim to support a negotiated settlement. On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned the Taliban that it will not gain the international recognition it seeks and lifting of sanctions if it takes over Afghanistan by force.

On Tuesday, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik Washington and Moscow have overlapping interests in Afghanistan and said it is important to launch the process of substantive negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban and form a new coalition transitional leadership.

"Diplomacy is the name of the New Belt and Road Great Game," foreign policy experts Elizabeth Gould and Paul Fitzgerald told Sputnik, referring to China's regional development initiative.

Gould and Fitzgerald were the first two Western journalists the Afghan communist government allowed back in the country during the 1980s. However, they do not believe the Taliban want to sustain the internecine warfare that has plagued the country since King Zahir Shah was ousted in a family coup in the early 1970s.

"The Taliban want legitimacy and a renewed civil war won't serve their goals," the authors of several books on Afghanistan said. "Neither will it serve Pakistan's long sought desire to control Afghanistan by keeping it in chaos - when it will only benefit by joining in a full partnership in the Belt and Road initiative."

History repeats itself as Afghanistan proves again to be a game changer for great powers and the United States is no exception, Gould and Fitzgerald added.

"Washington should come to grips that its role on the world stage has changed and accept the fact that its military empire has come to an end," Gould and Fitzgerald said. "All the US can do now is hinder Russia and China from succeeding. The US failure is colossal... Afghanistan is the roundabout of Central Asia. It's a key hub for trade and the US just lost it."

Russia has been projecting military power into Central Asia since 2012, which is expected given its historically strategic position in the region, but it is highly doubtful Moscow will be drawn into another quagmire in Afghanistan, especially after watching the United States withdraw, the authors said.

The Russian Central Military District said some one thousand Russian servicemen will take part in joint counterterrorism military drills in Tajikistan along with troops from Uzbekistan in August



near the Tajik border with Afghanistan. More than 1,500 servicemen and around 300 units of weapons and military equipment from the three countries are set to be involved in the drills. Michael O'Hanlon, who specializes in US defense strategy at the Brookings Institution, told Sputnik he expects the United States to prioritize finding ways for contractors to provide technical support and maintenance for the Afghan Air Force.

"Providing American airpower in support of Afghan police and soldiers in the event of a major Taliban attack would be a big help too, but also a big decision by President [Joe] Biden that I cannot confidently predict," O'Hanlon said.

#### DOUBTS OVER CEASEFIRE

Although a ceasefire seems a possible option for the Taliban, some say the likelihood of that happening is not very promising.

Last week, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said about half of the 419 district centers in Afghanistan are under Taliban control, but they have not taken over any of the 34 provincial capitals in the country.

O'Hanlon doubts international legitimacy is enough to persuade the Taliban to halt its advance.

"The ceasefire and Pakistan ideas are theoretically appealing but practically and pragmatically unpromising," O'Hanlon said. "It won't be enough by itself [legitimacy]. The Taliban think they are winning and think they will win - comprehensively and across the country. I am not sure they are right. But I am confident that is what they now believe. And our departure won't tend to change that view, I'm afraid."

O'Hanlon also warned that a Taliban takeover of Kabul could lead to the formation of a nation-wide caliphate with at least some toleration for the al-Qaeda terrorist group (outlawed in Russia).

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#### US Guided Missile Destroyer Benfold Transits Taiwan Strait - 7th Fleet

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - A US guided missile destroyer transited through the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law, the US 7th Fleet said on Wednesday.

"The Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Benfold (DDG 65) conducted a routine Taiwan Strait transit July 28 (local time) through international waters in accordance with international law," the 7th Fleet said in a statement.

The US Navy said the transit demonstrates the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region and will continue to operate anywhere international law allows it to do so.

The Chinese military denounced the transit of a different Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, the Curtis Wilbur, through the Taiwan Strait in June. The spokesperson for the Chinese military's Eastern Theater Command Zhang Chunhui said then the action deliberately undermined regional security and damaged peace and stability.

The Benfold conducted what the US government calls a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea earlier in July. China responded by accusing the United States of trespassing.

US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman raised concerns earlier about China's position on the Taiwan Strait during meetings with Chinese officials, including Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi.

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US Condemns Violence Against Iranian Protesters, Supports Right to Assemble - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the use of violence against protesters in Iran and expresses support for their right to peaceful assembly, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Wednesday.

"We condemn the use of violence against peaceful protesters. We support the rights of Iranians to peacefully assemble and express themselves, without fear of violence and detention by security forces," Price said.

The State Department statement came after reports emerged that Iranian security forces had fired on protesters, resulting in multiple deaths.

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US Bipartisan Infrastructure Package Includes \$550Bln in New Investment - White House

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US bipartisan infrastructure package plan includes some \$550 billion in new federal investment, the White House announced on Wednesday.

"Today, the President and the bipartisan group announced agreement on the details of a once-in-a-generation investment in our infrastructure, which will be taken up in the Senate for consideration. In total, the deal includes \$550 billion in new federal investment in America's infrastructure. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal will grow the economy, enhance our competitiveness, create good jobs, and make our economy more sustainable, resilient, and just," the statement said.

The bill includes some \$40 billion on bridge repair and rehabilitation, while \$17.5 billion will be invested in projects that are either large or complex for traditional funding programs. Also, about \$39 billion will be invested to modernize transit and to improve accessibility for people with disabilities and for the elderly. Some \$73 billion will be devoted to clean drinking water and \$21 billion will go to environmental remediation.

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Now Not Ideal Time for Raising US Interest Rates, Fed Focused on Asset Purchase - Powell

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The time is not right yet for raising US interest rates as the Federal Reserve is still focused on buying bonds to support an economy recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, the central bank's chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"Right now, it's not the ideal time to think about raising interest rates; instead, the Fed is focusing on asset purchases," Powell said, referring to the Fed's monthly buying of \$120 billion worth of bonds to support the economy. "In an ideal world, you wouldn't boost rates before starting to taper."

The Fed has kept US interest rates anchored at a record low level of between zero and 0.25 percent since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 to support the economy.

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#### **Biden Issues Directive to Raise Standard for Goods Considered 'Made in America'**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday said he has ordered the Office of Management and Budget to issue a rule requiring that a product must be manufactured 75 percent in the United States in order to be considered made in America.

"Today I'm directing the budget office to issue a rule to raise the amount of domestic content required to be made in America from 55 percent to 75 percent," Biden said during remarks at a manufacturing facility in the state of Pennsylvania.

The White House previously said in a report that US supply chains are struggling with near record-low inventories of homes and cars, as complications caused by the coronavirus pandemic restrictive measures leaving manufacturers with ten days less supply than a year ago for most goods.

The inventory deficit in microchips, framing lumber, wallboard and roofing materials was withholding business activity across industries from automaking to homebuilding, the report said.

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#### **US Inflation May Be Stronger, More Persistent Than Projected - Fed's Powell**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US inflation could run higher and be more persistent in the near term than forecast as the economy adjusts to bottlenecks caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"Inflation could turn out to be higher and more persistent than we expect," Powell told a news conference after the conclusion of the Fed's July policy meeting. "It's clear that at this time inflation is actually running above 2 percent, has been and will be at least we expect in coming months before returning down toward our target."

The Fed has a long-term inflation target of 2 percent per annum.



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#### **US Senators Introduce Bill to Bar Use of Federal Funds for Huawei, ZTE Purchases**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in the US Senate that would prohibit federal spending from the American Rescue Plan Act for purchases of Chinese telecommunications equipment, especially from Huawei and ZTE, Senator Tom Cotton's office said on Wednesday.

"Senators Tom Cotton and Mark Warner introduced the American Telecommunications Security Act to prohibit federal funding from the American Rescue Plan Act from being used to purchase Chinese telecommunications equipment, including from Huawei and ZTE," the senator's office said in a press release.

The senators emphasized the bill is vital to US national security, the release said.

Last June, the Federal Communications Commission formally designated ZTE and Huawei as national security threats.

US firms must obtain government licenses before they can do business with Huawei. Congress also approved in December \$1.9 billion to fund the replacement of ZTE and Huawei equipment in US networks.

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#### **Canada Not Among Countries Included in UK Quarantine Exemption List**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Canada has not been included on the United Kingdom's coronavirus quarantine exemption list that was unveiled on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the UK government announced that passengers fully vaccinated with vaccines that have been authorized by the United States and the European Union regulatory agencies will not have to self-isolate upon arrival in Britain if traveling from the exempted countries.

The UK Department for Transport and Global Affairs Canada did not respond immediately to Sputnik's request to clarify why Canada, which has achieved some of the highest vaccination rates in the world and has approved all of the vaccines approved by United States and European Union regulators, was left off the list.

Addressing the UK's decision at a press briefing later in the day, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said she respect a sovereign nations' ability to make independent decisions regarding border measures.

Some Canadians, who have traveled abroad, have previously voiced displeasure with some businesses outside of the country, because their mixed-dose vaccination schedule, approved by Ottawa, was not considered to meet the criteria for full vaccination.

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**Fed Says No Rate Hike, Asset Tapering Until US Employment, Inflation Near Its Target**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve has decided to leave US interest rates at near zero and to continue with its monthly \$120 billion bond program until employment and inflation nears its targets, the central bank said at the close of its July policy meeting on Wednesday.

"The Committee indicated that it would continue to increase its holdings of Treasury securities by at least \$80 billion per month and of agency mortgage-backed securities by at least \$40 billion per month until substantial further progress has been made toward its maximum employment and price stability goals," the Fed said in statement, referring to the decision by its Federal Open Market Committee.

The central bank said it expects to maintain an accommodative stance of monetary policy until these outcomes are achieved, and that action includes keeping interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent.

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**Congress Panel Demands Pentagon Review Breathing Problems for F-35 Pilots - Reports**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - A US House Armed Services subcommittee is demanding that the Defense Department investigate breathing problems for pilots flying the troubled and controversial F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, The Hill reported on Wednesday.

The US House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces has inserted language into the 2022 National Defense Appropriations Act (NDAA) to review the F-35's breathing system for its pilots, the report said.

The language was inserted after a NASA study released earlier this year expressed concern on the issue, committee aides told reporters on a background call on Wednesday, the report said. The NASA study investigated why F-15 and F-18 pilots had experienced breathing issues and its researchers also found that the F-35's breathing system delivered an unpredictable amount of air flow at the beginning, middle and end of each breath and that it changed from breath-to-breath, the report also said.

Armed Services Committee staffers failed to get active cooperation on the issue from the Defense Department's own F-35 office that works with both the US Air Force and the jet's prime contractor Lockheed Martin, the report added.

The subcommittee's portion of the NDAA now requires the Defense Department to investigate and assess the problem and to implement corrective actions for it, according to the report.

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#### Three in 5 US Voters Blame Biden for Inflation Spike to 13-Year High - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - A 59 percent majority of US registered voters hold the Biden administration economic policies responsible for raising inflation, which surged 5.4 percent in June compared with a year earlier, a new Morning Consult and Politico poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Nearly 3 in 5 voters said that the Biden administration's policies are to blame for the 13-year high in inflation, including 39 percent who said the policies are 'very responsible' for the milestone," a press release explaining the poll said.

The tally reflected expectations of future price increases in travel, used cars and home improvement, which have grown significantly from the beginning of the year, the release added. At 82 percent, Republicans were the driving force behind elevated inflation fears, but a large share of Democrats (41 percent) also held the Biden administration's policies responsible for the much higher inflation levels, the release added.

In June, US consumer prices rose 5.4 percent from June 2019 while the Consumer Price Index increased 0.9 percent from May on a seasonally adjusted basis, a monthly rate that if maintained for an entire year would result in 10.8 percent annual inflation before compounding. Both measures show prices rising at the fastest pace since 2008, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said.

The Biden administration and the Federal Reserve have said for months that recent inflation is temporary, an expected byproduct of the US economy reopening after more than a year.

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#### Google to Extend Voluntary Remote Work Option, Require Vaccination for Office Workers

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Google will extend its voluntary remote work option through mid-October and require its employees returning to work in-person to be vaccinated, CEO Sundar Pichai said on Wednesday.

"First, anyone coming to work on our campuses will need to be vaccinated. We're rolling this policy out in the US in the coming weeks and will expand to other regions in the coming months... Second, we are extending our global voluntary work-from-home policy through October 18," Pichai said in an email to Google employees.

The remote work extension is meant to provide flexibility for those employees working in areas where the Delta variant of the coronavirus has caused a spike in new cases. Pichai also said that the company will be allowing parents, caregivers and those in special circumstances to apply for extended leave through the end of the year.



The vaccine mandate for employees will not apply until doses are "widely available" in their area, Pachai said, adding that there will be an exceptions process for those who cannot be vaccinated for medical or other protected reasons.

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#### US Senators to Introduce Bill to End US Reliance on Pharmaceutical Supply Chain From China

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican lawmakers will introduce legislation to end the United States' dependence on pharmaceutical supply chains from China, US Senator Tom Cotton's office said on Wednesday.

"Senator Tom Cotton along with Senators Marsha Blackburn, Mike Braun, Ted Cruz, and Rick Scott, will today introduce the Protecting our Pharmaceutical Supply Chain from China Act, which would end US dependence on China for pharmaceutical manufacturing," the senator's office said in a press release.

The bill would prohibit pharmaceutical purchases from China or products with pharmaceutical ingredients made in China, the release said.

The measure would seek to establish pharmaceutical supply chains in the United States by providing economic incentives for companies to manufacture drugs and medical equipment in the country, the release also said.

The Republican lawmakers accuse Beijing of covering up the origins of the coronavirus pandemic and threatening to cut US access to medicine from China throughout the pandemic, the release added.

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#### New York City Offers Residents \$100 to Get Vaccinated Against Coronavirus - Mayor

NEW YORK, July 28 (Sputnik) - New York City is offering \$100 to each resident to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, with Mayor Bill de Blasio saying on Wednesday the inducement was necessary as infections and hospitalizations from the virus were increasing again.

"We're on the verge of administering 10 million COVID-19 vaccine doses in New York City. Now, we're sweetening the deal," de Blasio said in a Twitter post. "100 bucks is yours if you get vaccinated. Do it today."

Nearly five million New Yorkers have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine, but the speed of inoculations has slowed. Two million adult New Yorkers are still unvaccinated, according to city records.

New York City's new caseload was 929 on Tuesday, with 108 new hospitalizations compared to 226 new cases and 22 hospitalizations a month earlier.

De Blasio on Monday ordered that all government workers in New York City be vaccinated for COVID or face weekly tests as case counts spike from the Delta variant of the virus. The order came ahead of a September 13 reopening date for all schools in the city as a million students are set to return to the classrooms.

On Tuesday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a new recommendation that indoor masking, including for the vaccinated, be reintroduced in all areas of high coronavirus transmissibility and also in all schools as a precaution.

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The UK Department for Transport and Global Affairs Canada did not respond immediately to Sputnik's request to clarify why Canada, which has achieved some of the highest vaccination rates in the world and has approved all of the vaccines approved by United States and European Union regulators, was left off the list.

Some Canadians, who have traveled abroad, have previously voiced displeasure with some businesses outside of the country, because their mixed-dose vaccination schedule, approved by Ottawa, was not considered to meet the criteria for full vaccination.

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#### **Renewables Set Record in 2020 for US Electricity, 2nd Only to Natural Gas - Energy Dept.**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Renewable power sources, including wind, hydroelectric, solar, biomass and geothermal, generated a record level of US electricity in 2020, exceeded only by natural gas, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Wednesday.

"In 2020, renewable energy sources generated a record 834 billion kilowatthours (kWh) of electricity, or about 21 percent of all the electricity generated in the United States," an EIA report said.

Renewables surpassed both nuclear (790 billion kWh) and coal (774 billion kWh) for the first time on record. Only natural gas (1,617 billion kWh) produced more US electricity than renewables in 2020, the report also said.

US electricity generation from coal in all sectors declined 20 percent in 2020 from 2019, while renewables increased 9 percent, the report added.

Wind currently the most prevalent source of renewable electricity in the United States, grew 14 percent while utility-scale solar generation increased 26 percent, and mall-scale solar such as grid-connected rooftop panels, increased 19 percent, according to the report.

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**Efficacy of Pfizer/BioNTech Coronavirus Vaccine Drops to 84% After 6 Months - Report**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The efficacy of Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine slips to 84 percent after six months, a new report revealed by medRxiv showed on Wednesday. "Efficacy peaked at 96.2 percent during the interval from 7 days to <2 months post-dose 2, and declined gradually to 83.7 percent from 4 months post-dose 2 to the data cut-off, an average decline of ~6 percent every 2 months," the report said. Ongoing follow-up is needed to understand persistence of the vaccine effect over time, the report added.

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US Sanctions Turkish, Syrian Men for Providing Material Support to Terror Groups -Treasury  
WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on one Turkey-based supporter of al-Qaeda and one Syria-based supporter of the Hayet Tahir Al-Sham (both banned in Russia) for helping to finance the two terrorist organizations, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"The United States is designating one Turkey-based al-Qa'ida financial facilitator for materially assisting al-Qa'ida and one Syria-based terrorist fundraiser and recruiter for providing material support to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a group linked with al-Qa'ida," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

Al-Qaeda utilized the bank accounts associated with Turkey-based Hasan Al-Shaban to coordinate the movement of money from associates across North Africa, Western Europe and North America, the statement said. Al-Shaban also helped coordinate the transfer of funds to Turkey, it added.

The Treasury Department also said Syria-based Farrukh Furkatovitch Fayzimatov recruited new members, posted propaganda and solicited donations for HTS on social media. Fayzimatov also organized a community fundraising campaign to buy equipment for HTS, it added.

Both men are being designated pursuant to Executive Order 13224 for their financial and material support for the terror organizations and any of their property in the United States must be reported and blocked, according to the statement.



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**Biden Would Welcome Visit By India's Modi, But No Date Determined Yet - Blinken**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration would welcome a meeting between US President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, no fixed dates have been set, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"I know that President Biden would welcome it for the prime minister to visit, and equally for President Biden to come here. We haven't fixed any dates yet, but I'm sure we'll see that in the future," Blinken said in an interview with CNN, when asked about a potential meeting between the two leaders.

Blinken added that there would be "ample opportunity" for a meeting between Biden and Modi. Blinken is the third high-ranking official of the Biden administration to visit New Delhi. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin paid a visit to the Indian capital in March and Special Envoy on Climate John Kerry did so in April.

The top US diplomat arrived in India on Tuesday for his first visit to the country since assuming his position. Blinken also met with his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar to discuss supplies of coronavirus vaccines, regional security amid turmoil in Afghanistan, as well as India's human rights record.

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**US Sees Chinese Efforts to Address Afghan Turmoil as 'Positive' Step - Blinken**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States views Chinese efforts to address the increasing instability in Afghanistan as a positive step, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"If China is acting on those interests, if other countries are acting on those interests, that's a positive thing," Blinken said in an interview with CNN, following a high-level meeting in Beijing between Chinese officials and the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia).

Blinken added that a peaceful resolution is in the interests of other regional players, including Russia, India, Iran and Pakistan, which leads to a "truly representative and inclusive" government as opposed to the restoration of an Islamic emirate.

According to current projections, the Taliban is on track to reclaim control over Afghanistan after foreign troops complete their withdrawal. Earlier this month, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is more than 95 percent complete.

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#### Biden Says Met With Belarus Opposition Leader Tikhanovskaya

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he met with former Belarusian opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya at the White House.

"I was honored to meet with Tikhanovskaya at the White House this morning," Biden said via Twitter. "The United States stands with the people of Belarus in their quest for democracy and universal human rights."

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#### UN Concerned By Tensions on Armenia-Azerbaijan Border, Calls for Restraint - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has been following with concern reports of tensions on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and urged both sides to show restraint and avoid actions risking to escalate the tensions, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Armenia's Defense Ministry said three Armenian soldiers were killed in border clashes in the eastern Gegharkunik Province. Later, Yerevan and Baku agreed on a ceasefire brokered by Russia's peacekeeping forces.

"We have been following with growing concern continuing reports of tensions on the Armenian-Azerbaijan border, including the latest incident reported today," Haq said. "While the UN is not in a position to verify such reports, we urge both sides to exercise restraint, refrain from any actions that escalate tensions and address related concerns through dialogue."

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#### UN Welcomes Productive US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue in Geneva - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the first round of the Strategic Stability Dialogue between Russia and the United States that concluded earlier on Wednesday and expressed hope the talks will continue to be productive, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing.

"We welcome any productive dialogue between all member states, but, in particular, between key states, such as these two permanent members of the UN Security Council," Haq said. "We continue to be hopeful that these talks will continue to be productive."

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**US Weekly Crude Draw Resumes, Diesel Use Spikes Amid Summer Demand for Fuel**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - US crude oil stockpiles resumed their downward trend last week after the previous week's hike as refiners continued to maximize gasoline output while diesel inventories fell to their lowest since April, data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed.

US crude oil inventories fell 4.1 million barrels for the week ended July 16, well above the 2.5 million barrels that industry analysts polled by US media forecast, the EIA's weekly Petroleum Status Report showed on Wednesday. Crude inventories increased for the first time in nine weeks in the previous week to July 9, after drawing down almost 50 million barrels over two months.

The big summer draws for crude come as US refiners focus on pushing out as much gasoline as they can to meet projected demand during the peak driving season. According to the EIA, refiners operated last week at 91.1 percent of capacity, at around levels last seen in the summer of 2019 - well before the onset of the pandemic last year.

Gasoline stockpiles on their own fell by 2.25 million barrels against a forecast 1.24 million. In the previous week, the count for gasoline declined by just 121,000 barrels versus a forecast draw of 1.04 million.

The outperformer for the July 16 week, however, was diesel-heavy distillates, which drew down by 3.1 million barrels, more than quadruple the forecast decline of 700,000. The outsized draw shows that demand for trucking and other commercial vehicle fuel was as strong as the consumption of gasoline.

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**Russia Seeks to Boost Activity of Quartet for Middle East Peace - Deputy Envoy to UN**

UNITED NATIONS, July 28 (Sputnik) - Russia intends to continue boosting the activity of the Middle East Quartet to advance peace in the region and calls on the members of the group to examine Moscow's initiatives, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

"We believe it's important to strive towards consolidating international efforts in favor of resolving the Palestinian question in accordance with a two-state solution," Polyanskiy said during a UN Security Council meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"In these conditions, we intend to continue trying to boost the activity of the Quartet. We call on our colleagues in the Quartet to examine our well-known initiatives, including holding a ministerial meeting as well as consultations in an expanded format, with the participation of regional states," he said.

After the most recent Israeli-Palestinian escalation in May, Russia proposed to hold a meeting of the Quartet - comprising the United Nations, Russia, European Union and the United States - with the participation of Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Palestinians, Israelis, and the possible inclusion of Saudi Arabia.

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#### Canada's Inflation Rate Dips to 3.1% in June Edging Closer to Central Bank Projections

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Canada's annual inflation rate slowed to 3.1 percent in June, drawing closer to the country's central bank projections, the state statistics agency said on Wednesday.

"The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 3.1 percent on a year-over-year basis in June, down from a 3.6 percent gain in May," Statistics Canada said in its monthly CPI report.

Excluding the price for gasoline, the annual inflation rate rose by 2.2 percent, the report said. The increase brings the CPI closer to Bank of Canada projections, which said in its Monetary Policy Report that the inflation rate will remain "will likely remain at or above 3 percent" for the remainder of 2021.

Canada's central banker Tiff Macklem has said that the CPI will dip its target rate of 2 percent sometime in 2022.

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#### UPDATE - US Imposes Syria-Related Sanctions on 8 Individuals, 10 Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has unveiled a number of fresh Syria-related sanctions targeting prisons and individuals involved in alleged rights abuses, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

This is the first time the Biden administration imposes sanctions on Syria, the Treasury Department said.

Eight individuals and 10 entities, including branches of the Syrian general and military intelligence, have been blacklisted by the Treasury, according to a notice on the Treasury Department's website.

"The individuals and entities we are designating today have been [involved in] gross violations of human rights, including supervising the torture and killing of detainees," Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control Director Andrea Gacki said.

Gacki said more than 3,500 detainees had died in one prison in Syria as per information supplied by a defector from the Syrian military,

The Treasury Department also sanctioned two armed groups that robbed Syrian civilians, Gacki added.



Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken echoed the Treasury Department's statement and accused the Syrian government of human rights violations.

"The world must renew its shared resolve to promote the dignity and human rights of all Syrians. We urge the international community to join our calls for a nationwide ceasefire, the immediate release of those arbitrarily detained, and for information about the fate of the missing," Blinken said.

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Talks Between US, Russian Diplomats in Geneva 'Professional, Substantive' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The negotiations on strategic stability between the Russian and the US delegations in Geneva on Wednesday were professional and substantive, State Department spokesman Ned Price said speaking on the results of the meeting.

Earlier in the day, the Russian delegation led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov met with the US delegation headed by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Geneva to discuss strategic stability and arms control. The talks took place roughly a month after Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden agreed on strategic dialogue during the landmark summit in the Swiss city. "The discussions in Geneva were professional and substantive," Price said in a readout of the talks.

Price pointed out that the US delegation discussed with their Russian counterparts the United States' policy priorities and agreed to meet again at the end of September.

"We remain committed, even in times of tension, to ensuring predictability and reducing the risk of armed conflict and threat of nuclear war," Price said.

On Thursday, the US officials will travel to Brussels on July 29 to brief NATO on the strategic stability talks with Russia, he added.

The first meeting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden took place in Geneva on June 16. The leaders issued a joint statement emphasizing that the two sides intended to launch a comprehensive bilateral dialogue on strategic stability that would be substantive and energetic. In addition, Russia and the United States intend to begin consultations on cybersecurity, prisoner swaps and arms control.

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Most Americans Back Holding Olympics During Pandemic Despite Waning Interest - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - A 55 percent majority of Americans agree with the decision to hold the Olympics in Tokyo during the coronavirus pandemic, although about a third have less interest in the games than in years past, a Monmouth University poll revealed on Wednesday.

"A majority (55 percent) of the American public feels it was a good idea to hold the Tokyo Olympics this year. On the other hand, 36 percent say it was a bad idea, including 24 percent who say it should have been postponed again and 11 percent who say it should have been canceled entirely," a press release summarizing the poll said.

About four in ten say they will watch either a lot (11 percent) or some (27 percent) of the Olympics coverage. Another 32 percent of the public will watch very little of the Tokyo Games and 30 percent do not plan to watch any of it, the release said.

Just over one-third (36 percent) of Americans expressly say they have less interest in this year's Olympics compared with past Games, the release added.

The release attributed declining interest to the pandemic, as well as a backlash against athletes who use the Games as a forum to make political statements, according to the release.

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**UN Palestine Agency Facing \$100Mln Deficit Under Program Budget - Mideast Coordinator**

UNITED NATIONS, July 28 (Sputnik) - The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is facing a \$100 million deficit in the budget for its programs and cash flow crisis obstructing the smooth opening of the school year, UN Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Lynn Hastings said on Wednesday. "I remain concerned about the financial situation of UNRWA," Hastings told the UN Security Council. "As of today, the projected shortfall under its Program Budget amounts to \$100 million. The agency also faces an imminent cash flow crisis which risks impacting the smooth opening of the school year for half a million girls and boys in Gaza."

Hastings explained that the absence of a fully funded program budget compromises UNRWA's ability to conduct humanitarian and early recovery activities in Gaza in response to the fighting between Israel and Hamas in May.

Hastings called on all donors, including those in the Arab region, to advance the disbursement of funds as much as possible to avoid a disruption of UNRWA's services and aid.

In November 2020, UNRWA overcame a major financial crisis when the Agency could not pay salaries to its employees.

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**US Advance International Trade Deficit Rose \$3Bln in June to \$91.2Bln - Commerce Dept.**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The deficit in US advance international trade, which accounts for payments done ahead of shipment, increased by \$3 billion in June to \$91.2 billion, the Commerce Department announced on Wednesday.

"The international trade deficit was \$91.2 billion in June, up \$3.0 billion from \$88.2 billion in May," the Census Bureau, a unit of the Commerce Department, said, referring to the payments done as soon as an order is confirmed or any time before shipment.

Advance payment for imports of goods for June were at \$236.7 billion, \$3.5 billion more than May imports, the Census Bureau said.

Advance payment for exports of goods for June were at \$145.5 billion, or \$500 million more than in May, the Census Bureau added.

The difference between the two made up the net advance deficit for international trade, according to the Census Bureau.

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#### US Imposes Syria-Related Sanctions on 8 Individuals, 10 Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has unveiled a number of fresh Syria-related sanctions targeting prisons and individuals involved in alleged rights abuses, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

This is the first time the Biden administration imposes sanctions on Syria, the Treasury Department said.

Eight individuals and 10 entities, including branches of the Syrian general and military intelligence, have been blacklisted by the Treasury, according to a notice on the Treasury Department's website.

"The individuals and entities we are designating today have been [involved in] gross violations of human rights, including supervising the torture and killing of detainees," Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control Director Andrea Gacki said.

Gacki said more than 3,500 detainees had died in one prison in Syria as per information supplied by a defector from the Syrian military.

The Treasury Department also sanctioned two armed groups that robbed Syrian civilians, Gacki added.

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#### Talks Between US, Russian Diplomats in Geneva Were Professional, Substantive - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The negotiations on strategic stability between the Russian and the US delegations in Geneva on Wednesday were professional, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

The Russian delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, while the US side was headed by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

"The discussions in Geneva were professional and substantive," Price said in a readout of the talks.

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US Officials to Head to Brussels Thursday to Brief NATO on Talks With Russia - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Senior US officials will travel to Brussels on July 29 to brief NATO on the strategic stability talks with Russia, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the Russian delegation led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov met with the US delegation headed by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Geneva to discuss strategic stability and arms control.

"Senior officials from Departments of State and Defense will travel to Brussels, Belgium on July 29 to brief Allies at NATO headquarters," Price said.

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US Discusses Policy Priorities With Russia During Strategic Stability Dialogue- State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The US delegation to the US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue discussed with their Russian counterparts Washington's policy priorities and agreed to meet again at the end of September, White House spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"The US delegation discussed US policy priorities and the current security environment, national perceptions of threats to strategic stability, prospects for new nuclear arms control, and the format for future Strategic Stability Dialogue sessions," Price said. "The two delegations agreed to meet again in a plenary session at the end of September, and to hold informal consultations in the interim."

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US Committed to Reducing Risk of Conflict, Threat of Nuclear War With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to reducing the risk of a direct military confrontation and the threat of nuclear war with Russia notwithstanding the ongoing tensions between Washington and Moscow, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.



"We remain committed, even in times of tension, to ensuring predictability and reducing the risk of armed conflict and threat of nuclear war," Price said in a statement.

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Israel's Bennett to Discuss With Biden US Peace Efforts - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett are expected to discuss the United States' attempts to bring the Palestinian and Israeli sides together during the Bennett's upcoming visit to Washington, Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan said on Wednesday.

"There are, of course, attempts by the American administration to bring the two sides together, but I think all the details should be discussed between President Biden and Prime Minister Bennett whenever he will visit Washington, and I expect this visit will take place quite soon," Erdan told reporters.

The ambassador said the two leaders' teams were currently coordinating the details of the visit. Erdan emphasized that the only way to promote peace between the two parties is to engage in direct negotiations without any preconditions.

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US Homeland Security Dept. Orders Employees to Wear Masks Indoors

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) -Face masks will be required of all employees working indoors, including those fully vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, to comply with the latest guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Wednesday.

"DHS is following the new CDC guidance... and instructions to ensure the safety of our workforce," the department said via Twitter. "Beginning today, all employees, regardless of vaccination status, will be required to wear a mask indoors and physically distance."

On Tuesday, the CDC announced new recommendations that vaccinated people return to wearing masks indoors in parts of the United States where the coronavirus is reportedly surging - a threshold that applies to Washington, DC - due to the ability of the Delta variant to spread among vaccinated individuals.

In addition to DHS, the White House and the House of Representatives also imposed mask requirements on everyone indoors, including vaccinated individuals.

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#### US, Canada Discuss NORAD Modernization - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada are in discussions on modernizing the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), US Northern Command chief Glen VanHerck told reporters on Wednesday.

"Those discussions are ongoing, President [Joe] Biden and Prime Minister [Justin] Trudeau talked about NORAD modernization in their first meeting," VanHerck said during a press briefing.

VanHerck said he is satisfied with the pace of the negotiations on modernizing NORAD.

"Now we are going to move forward to Department level [talks] to see what the way forward is for NORAD modernization," VanHerck said.

In February, Biden said after holding talks with Trudeau that the United States and Canada will work to modernize NORAD.

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#### US Earmarks \$600Mln to Support Homeless Students - Education Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The US government released nearly \$600 million provided by the American Rescue Plan (ARP) for students experiencing homelessness, the Education Department said on Wednesday.

In April, the first \$200 million of the \$800 million in ARP funds were allocated for homeless students, the Education Department said in a press release.

"Following the Department's approval of state applications today, distribution of all of the remaining funds will give states and school districts access to this critical funding before the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year," the release said.

The additional \$600 million will be used by states and school districts to identify and support children experiencing homelessness, the release added.

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#### US Imposes Syria-Related Sanctions on 8 Individuals, 10 Entities - Treasury

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#### **US Next Generation Missile Interceptor on Schedule to Be Fielded By 2028 - General**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) is on schedule to be set up in the state of Alaska by 2028, US Northern Command Gen. Glen VanHerck told reporters on Wednesday.

"The NGI is planning to be fielded in 2028," VanHerck said during a press briefing. "To my knowledge, it is absolutely on schedule at this time."

The general explained that the Missile Defense Agency is also focused on a Long Range Discrimination Radar that is critical for the missile defense capabilities and is on track fielding it. "They are in stages of moving into their initial capabilities," VanHerck said.

NGI is an advanced interceptor designed to protect the United States against intercontinental ballistic missile attacks. In March, Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin received two contracts with a combined value of \$1.6 billion to develop designs for the next generation of US missile interceptors through the end of the Fiscal Year 2022.

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#### **Americans' Approval of US Supreme Court Dips Below 50% - Poll**

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - Forty-nine percent of Americans approve of the job the US Supreme Court is doing, down nine percentage points from a year ago and the first drop below majority approval since 2017, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

"The new reading comes from a July 6-21 Gallup poll, conducted after an eventful Supreme Court term featuring a 6-3 conservative majority since the confirmation last fall of Amy Coney Barrett to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg," a press release explaining the poll said.

The term featured a series of mixed rulings, including a rejection of a challenge to the Affordable Care Act; a ruling upholding an Arizona election law; a decision that allowed a Catholic social service agency to participate in a foster care program even if it refused to consider same-sex couples; and an extension of free speech rights for students to social media posts, the release noted.

In addition to the 49 percent of US adults who approve of the Supreme Court's job, 44 percent disapprove and 7 percent express no opinion, the release said.

Since Gallup began polling on the Supreme Court in 2000, more Americans have approved than disapproved of the way the Supreme Court was handling its job, albeit with approval averaging a slim 52 percent majority, the release added.

When Gallup first asked the Supreme Court job approval question in 2000, a record 62 percent approved. The margin narrowed in subsequent years but remained in positive territory, according to Gallup.

From 2013 and 2017 opinion was more evenly divided or net-negative. Since then, ratings have been improved although the 49 percent rating in the latest poll is down from 58 percent a year ago, Gallup said.

Results are based on telephone interviews with a random sample of 1,007 adults, ages 18 and above living in all 50 US states and Washington, DC. The results have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level.

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US to Send Over 9Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Doses to S. Africa, Nigeria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide to South Africa and Nigeria more than 9 million doses of the coronavirus vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna, the US State Department's Africa media hub said on Wednesday.

"[National Security Council] Senior Director Dana Banks just announced that the United States will be sending over 5 million doses of Pfizer vaccines to South Africa and just over 4 million doses of Moderna vaccines to Nigeria," it said via Twitter.

Banks underscored the United States' commitment to Africa's prosperity and increasing investment to the region. She also noted that the US International Development Finance Corporation will provide \$217 million in debt financing for a new 83 megawatt power plant in Sierra Leone.

Some 4 billion coronavirus vaccine doses have been administered globally and more than 4 million virus-related deaths reported worldwide, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.